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The Persisting Racial Chasm in Scores on the SAT College Entrance Examination
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The Persisting Racial Chasm in Scores on the SAT College Entrance Examination

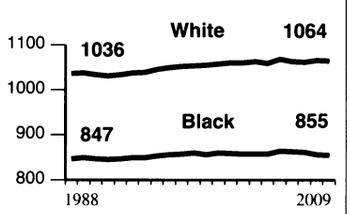
Twenty years ago many educators believed that the racial scoring gap on the SAT College Entrance Examination would continue to narrow until black and white scores converged. But exactly the opposite has happened. Today the racial testing gap is as large as it has been over the past 20 years.

WHEN THE COLLEGE Board released this year's results of the SAT college entrance examination in late August the headline of its press release read, "2009 College-Bound Seniors Are the Most Diverse Group Ever to Take the SAT as More Minority Students Prepare for Higher Education." Gaston Caperton, president of The College Board, stated, "We are tremendously encouraged by the increasing diversity of participation in the SAT."

But throughout the entire press release accompanying the test score report there was no reference to how well black or other minority students performed on the SAT. There was no mention of the fact that black scores declined in 2009. Nor was there any hint that the racial scoring gap between blacks and whites is as large now as it has been at any time in the past 20 years.

Due to increased criticism of the SAT test as an accurate predictor of success in college, and because test results are seen as a major obstacle to increasing racial diversity in higher education, it seems certain that The College Board does not want to focus attention on the widening of the racial scoring gap which is sure to fuel more criticism of the test. So not only does The College Board ignore the huge and growing racial chasm in SAT scores, it attempts to misdirect the public by heralding the more diverse pool of test takers.

Over the Past 20 Years There Has Been a Slight Improvement in the Combined SAT Scores of Both Blacks and Whites. But the Black-White Scoring Gap Has Actually Increased



Source: The College Board.

Chart © *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education.*

But JBHE will not ignore this pressing problem. Here we present our annual analysis on racial differences in scoring results on the SAT college admission test. In order to make a comparison with past SAT results, we ignore, for now, test results on the writing component of the SAT. This relatively new part of the SAT, which is easily gamed by students, is viewed with skepticism and often not given great consideration by admissions officials at scores of prestigious colleges and universities.

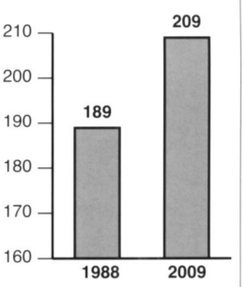
In 2009 the average black score on the combined math and verbal portions of the SAT test was 855. The mean score for whites on the combined math and verbal SAT was 1064, more than 17 percent higher.

Not only are African-American scores on the SAT far below the scores of whites, but they also trail the scores of every other major ethnic group in the United States including students of Puerto Rican and Mexican backgrounds. In fact, few people realize that American Indian and Alaska Native students on average score 124 points, or 10 percent, higher than the average score of black students. Mexican Americans score 61 points, or 5 percent, higher than blacks. On average, Asian-American students score 248 points, or 21 percent, higher than African Americans.

Blacks Losing Ground Compared to Whites

Since 1988 the Racial SAT Scoring Gap Between Blacks and Whites Has Increased

Point Differential Between Mean Score of Whites and Mean Score of Blacks on the Combined Math and Verbal Sections of the SAT



Source: The College Board.

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Trend in the Racial Scoring Gap

In 1976 The College Board published an analysis of the racial

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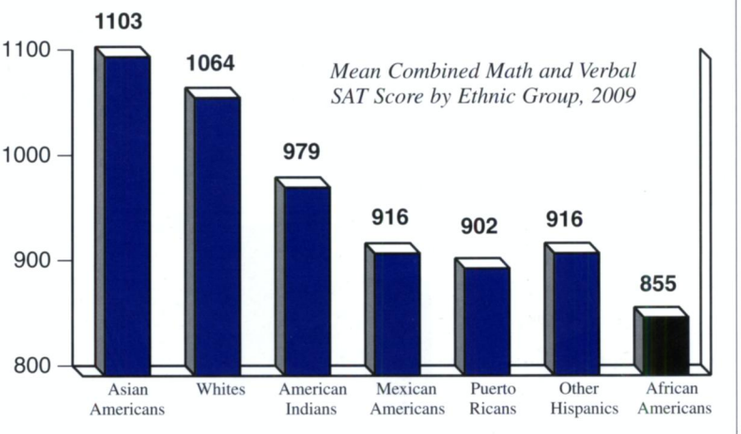
differences in scores on what was then called the Scholastic Aptitude Test. At that time the average black score was about 240 points, or 20 percent, below the average white score. By the early 1980s, the gap had shrunk to 200 points. Black scores were then 17 percent lower than the scores of whites. By 1988 the black-white SAT test scoring gap was down to 189 points. The trend was distinctly encouraging. Many specialists in the educational community predicted that in time the racial scoring gap between blacks and whites would disappear altogether.

But after 1988, progress in closing the SAT gap stopped abruptly and later it began to open up. Now the 189-point racial scoring gap that prevailed in 1988 has grown to 209 points. This is the largest racial scoring gap in 20 years. On a percentage basis the scoring gap has grown from 15.7 percent to 17.4 percent. These are the most unfortunate and persisting statistics that best tell the story of how deep the academic achievement gulf is between African Americans and the rest of the American population.

The Mean Composite SAT Test Score of Blacks Continues to Lag Not Only the Mean Score of Whites But Also That of Every Other Major Ethnic Group in the United States



Source: The College Board. Chart © *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education.*

Explaining the Black-White Scoring Gap on the SAT Test

A number of reasons are advanced to explain the large and persisting black-white SAT scoring gap. Sharp differences in family incomes are a major factor. Always there has been a direct correlation between family income and SAT scores. For both blacks and whites, as income goes up, so do test scores.

"In 1988 the black-white scoring gap on the SAT had shrunk to 189 points. Since that time the scoring gap has increased to 209 points."

In 2009, 22 percent of all black SAT test takers were from families with annual incomes below $20,000. Only 4 percent of white test takers were from families with incomes below $20,000. At the other extreme, just 2 percent of all black test takers were from families with incomes of more than $200,000. The comparable figure for white test takers was 9 percent.

Regrettably, there is a major flaw in the thesis that income differences explain the racial gap. Consider these observable facts from The College Board's 2009 data on the SAT:

"Whites from families with incomes of less than $20,000 had a mean SAT score of 972. This is 117 points higher than the national mean for all blacks."

- Whites from families with incomes of less than $20,000 had a mean SAT score of 972. This is 117 points, or 10 percent, higher than the national mean for *all* blacks.
- Whites from families with incomes below $20,000 had a mean SAT test score that was 12 points higher than blacks whose families had incomes between $160,000 and $200,000.
- Whites from families with incomes between $20,000 and $40,000 had average SAT scores of 994. This is just one point lower than blacks from families with incomes over $200,000.

Other Explanations for the Racial Scoring Gap on the SAT

Clearly, one of the main factors contributing to the SAT racial gap is that black students almost across the board are not being adequately schooled to perform well on the SAT and similar tests. Public schools in many neighborhoods with large black populations are underfunded, inadequately staffed, and ill equipped to provide the same quality of sec-

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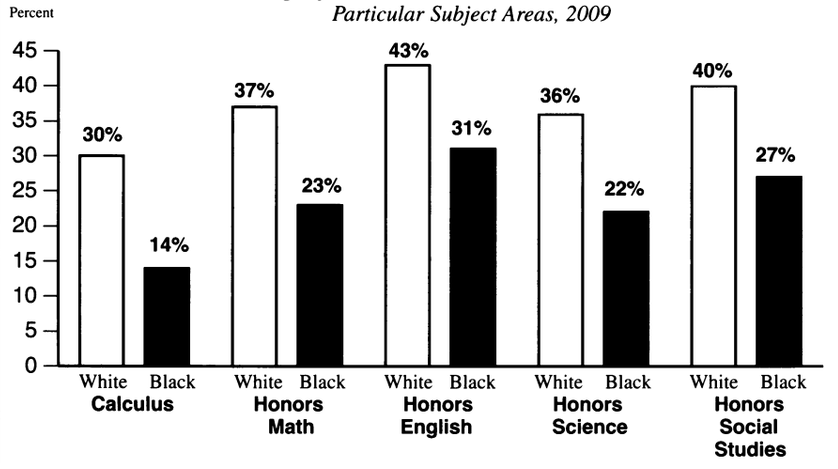
Here Is an Important Factor in Explaining the Persistent Racial Scoring Gap on the SAT:

Due to a Lower Level of Participation in Advanced Subjects in High School, Black Students Are Not as Well Prepared as White Students to Achieve High Scores on the SAT

Percentage of All SAT Test Takers Who Had Coursework in Particular Subject Areas, 2009



Source: The College Board.

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ondary education that is offered in predominantly white suburban school districts.

Data from The College Board shows that in 2009, 63 percent of white students who took the SAT were ranked in the top 20 percent of their high school classes. This compares to 45 percent of black test takers. Some 49 percent of white students who took the SAT report that their high school grade point average was in the A range. This compares to only 22 percent of black test takers. The mean high school grade point average for all white students who took the SAT was 3.40. For blacks, the figure was 3.00. These figures alone explain a large portion of the racial scoring gap on the SAT.

"Only 14 percent of black SAT test takers had calculus in high school. This is less than one half the rate for white students."

A further and important reason for the SAT racial gap appears to be the fact that black students who take the SAT have not followed the same academic track as white students. It is true that almost all blacks and whites who take the SAT have studied algebra in high school. But in higher level mathematics courses whites hold a very large lead. In 2009, 30 percent of white test takers had taken calculus in high school. Only 14 percent of black students had taken calculus, less than half the rate of whites. Thirty-seven percent of white SAT test takers had taken honors courses in mathematics compared to 23 percent of black SAT test takers.

Similar racial discrepancies appear in the level of instruction in English, the other major component of the SAT. A full 43 percent of all white test takers had completed honors courses in English compared to 31 percent of black test takers.

Also, whites are far more likely than blacks to have taken honors courses in science and social studies. The huge differences in course study between black and white high school students are a big contributor to the very large gap between the scores of whites and blacks. Whites, who are more likely to attend high-quality schools, have achieved a greater mastery of these subjects than have blacks.

"For SAT test takers, whites had an average high school grade point average of 3.40. For blacks, the average GPA was 3.00."

There are other reasons that contribute to the large scoring gap between blacks and whites on the SAT:

• The late John Ogbu, professor of anthropology at Berkeley, believed that broad cultural attributes among blacks — such as parental style, commitment to learning, and work ethic — bear a heavy responsibility for the black-white educational gap. In his final book, *Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb: A Study of Academic Disengagement,* Ogbu wrote that black students in the affluent homes of doctors and lawyers are looking at rappers in ghettos as their role models. Students talk the talk about what it takes to be a good student, Ogbu wrote, but few put forth the effort required to get good grades. This type of behavior is typical, Ogbu said, of racial minorities

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adapting to oppression and the lack of opportunity. Much as Bill Cosby and Barack Obama have urged recently, Ogbu also placed the blame on black parents. He took the position that many black parents are not offering sufficient guidance, are not spending enough time helping with homework, and are not paying adequate attention to their children's educational progress.

• Black students in predominantly white schools who study hard are often the subject of peer ridicule. They are accused of "acting white" by other blacks. This so-called ghetto chic in the form of peer pressure to shun academic pursuits undoubtedly has a considerable dragging effect on average black SAT scores.

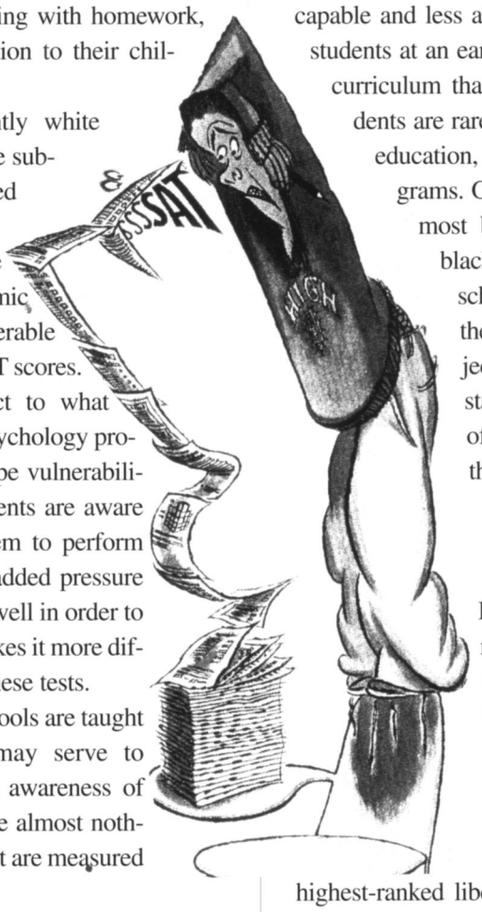
• Black students may be subject to what Columbia University provost and psychology professor Claude Steele calls "stereotype vulnerability." Steele contends that black students are aware of the fact that society expects them to perform poorly on standardized tests. This added pressure put upon black students to perform well in order to rebut the racial stereotype in fact makes it more difficult for them to perform well on these tests.

• Black students in some urban schools are taught an Afrocentric curriculum that may serve to increase black pride and foster an awareness of black culture. But these studies have almost nothing to do with the subject matters that are measured by the SAT.

• In the United States even middle-class blacks tend to be brought up in basically segregated surroundings. They are not taught the pathways and modes of thinking that are embedded in white culture and reflected in standardized tests. Black families that urge their children to go to college are often first-generation college graduates who grew up in households without the systems that support first-rate academic achievement.

• In some, if not many, cases, black schoolchildren are taught by white teachers who have low opinions of the abilities of black kids from the moment they enter the classroom. These teachers immediately write off black students as academic inferiors and do not challenge them sufficiently to achieve the skills necessary to perform well on standardized tests.

• School administrators and guidance counselors — both black and white — often believe that black students are less capable and less able to learn. They routinely track black students at an early age into vocational training or into a curriculum that is not college preparatory. Black students are rarely recommended for inclusion in gifted education, honors, or Advanced Placement programs. Once placed on the slow academic track, most black kids never escape. By the time black students are juniors and seniors in high school, they are typically so far behind their white counterparts in the critical subject areas necessary to perform well on standardized tests that they have little hope of ever matching the scores of whites on the SAT.



"African-American students taking the SAT may be subject to what psychologist Claude Steele calls stereotype vulnerability."

Almost No Blacks Among the Top Scorers on the SAT Test

It is important to explain how the SAT racial scoring gap affects the issue of affirmative action policies at the nation's highest-ranked colleges and universities. Under the SAT scoring system, most non-minority students hoping to qualify for admission to any of the nation's 25 highest-ranked universities and 25 highest-ranked liberal arts colleges need to score at least 700 on *each* portion of the SAT. For admission to the very highest ranked, brand-name schools such as Princeton or MIT, most applicants need scores of 750 to stand a good chance for admission.

Yet, as we shall see, only a minute percentage of black test takers score at these levels. Thus, if high-ranking colleges and universities were to abandon their policies of race-sensitive admissions, they will be choosing their first-year students from an applicant pool in which there will be practically no blacks.

Let's be more specific about the SAT racial gap among high-scoring applicants. In 2009, nationwide, 187,136 African Americans took the SAT college entry test. They

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Stanley Kaplan Revealed Flaws in the SAT

This past August, Stanley H. Kaplan, the father of the test preparation industry, died from heart failure in Manhattan at the age of 90.

Kaplan built a multibillion-dollar industry on the thesis that students could improve their scores on the SAT and other standardized tests by studying and learning how to take the tests. In the 1970s the Federal Trade Commission investigated Kaplan's claims and found that his service could improve his clients' test scores. This finding brought into question the legitimacy of the SAT and other standardized tests as proper barometers on which to base admissions decisions for colleges and graduate schools.

Blacks and other minorities, who routinely score 15 percent or more below whites on these tests, have pointed to Kaplan's success in improving scores through coaching as evidence that SAT results are not hard-wired in academic or cognitive ability but, rather, can be manipulated by studying and test preparation.

Given Kaplan's success in improving scores through coaching classes, many educators have come to the conclusion that the SAT should not be a significant factor in judging the qualifications of applicants for places at the nation's selective colleges and universities. Today more than 700 colleges and universities no longer require applicants to submit SAT scores.

Kaplan entered City College of New York at the age of 16. He graduated Phi Beta Kappa and was second in his class. However, he could not gain admission to any of the five medical schools to which he applied because they had all filled their quotas for Jewish admissions.

In 1938 Kaplan started his business in the basement of his parent's Brooklyn apartment. He tutored classmates in preparation for the New York State Regents Examination. In 1946 he began to tutor students to take the SAT. By the time he sold the business to the Washington Post Company in 1984, there were 120 Kaplan Test Centers nationwide.

made up 12 percent of all of the nation's SAT test takers. But only 1,093 African-American college-bound students scored 700 or above on the math SAT and only 1,283 scored at least 700 on the verbal SAT. Nationally, more than 97,000 students of all races scored 700 or above on the math SAT and more than 73,000 students scored 700 or above on the verbal SAT.

The important point is that in this top-scoring category of all SAT test takers, African Americans made up only 1.1 percent of the students scoring 700 or higher on the math test and only 1.8 percent of the students scoring 700 or higher on the verbal SAT.

Comparing High-Scoring Blacks With High-Scoring Whites

If we eliminate Asians and other minorities from the statistics and compare just white and black students, we find that 5.8 percent of all white SAT test takers scored 700 or above on the verbal portion of the test. But only *0.69 percent* of all black SAT test takers scored at this level. Therefore, whites were more than eight times as likely as blacks to score 700 or above on the verbal SAT. Overall, there are more than 38 times as many whites as blacks who scored at least 700 on the verbal SAT.

On the math SAT, only 0.58 percent of all black test takers scored at least 700 compared to 5.9 percent of all white test takers. Thus, whites were more than 10 times as likely as blacks to score 700 or above on the math SAT. Overall, there were more than 46 times as many whites as blacks who scored 700 or above on the math SAT.

"Nationwide, only 1,093 black students scored 700 or above on the mathematics portion of the SAT. There were more than 50,000 whites who posted a score of 700 or above on the math SAT."

In a *race-neutral* competition for the approximately 50,000 places for first-year students at the nation's 25 top-ranked universities, high-scoring blacks would be buried by a huge mountain of high-scoring non-black students.

Today, under prevailing affirmative action admissions policies, there are about 3,000 African-American first-year students matriculating at these 25 high-ranking universities, about 6 percent to 7 percent of all first-year students at these institutions. But if these schools were to adopt a strict race-neutral admissions policy where SAT scores were the most important qualifying yardstick, these universities could fill their freshman classes almost exclusively with students who score at the very top of the SAT scoring scale. As shown previously, African-American students make up at best between 1 percent and 2 percent of these high-scoring groups.

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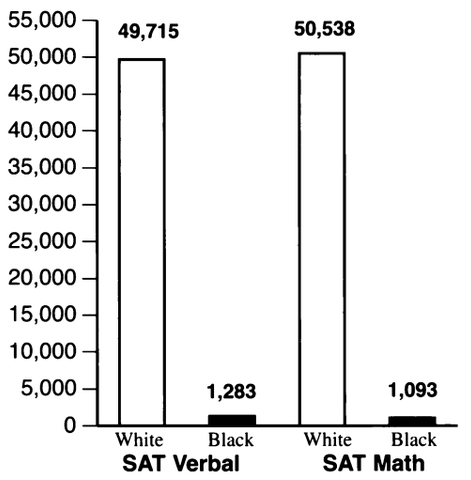
Almost No Blacks Have SAT Scores Equal to the Median Score of Whites at the Nation's Highest-Ranked Universities. In Fact, Whites Outnumber Blacks at the Highest-Scoring Levels by 40 to 1.

Number of Blacks and Whites Scoring 700 or Above on the SAT, 2009



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The Racial Gap on the SAT Writing Test

Now let's look at the racial gap on the new writing component of the SAT. This is the fourth year of the new SAT writing test. Many of the nation's highest-ranked colleges and universities do not give much weight to the results of this test because they are skeptical of its predictive power to determine who will do well in college. Also, many test takers have been trained by coaching schools to "hijack" the writing subject assigned by adapting an essay already written before the test by the student or a parent.

"Nationwide, blacks made up only 1.1 percent of the students scoring 700 or higher on the math test and only 1.8 percent of the students scoring 700 or higher on the verbal SAT."

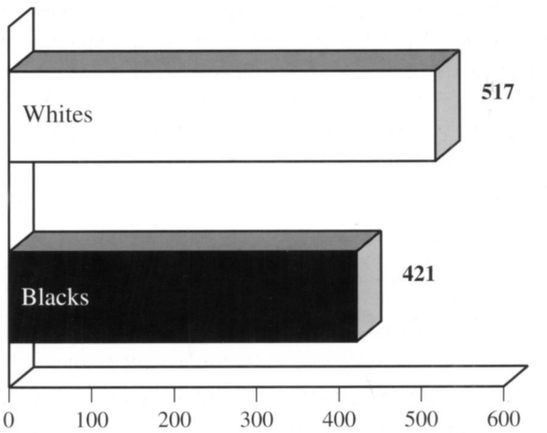
Nevertheless, The College Board reports that blacks do slightly better on the writing portion of the test in relation to whites than they do on other sections of the SAT. In 2009 the mean score on the writing test for blacks was 421. This is 96 points below the mean score for whites. The racial gap on the writing test has actually widened by five points from 2006, when the writing portion of the test was first administered by The College Board.

"At the moment there is no evidence that substantial progress toward closing the racial scoring gap on the SAT test will occur in the next quarter century. In fact, the gap may widen even further."

Many observers believed that the introduction of the writing component would, by design, lessen the racial scoring gap in order to deflect criticism of The College Board. It is probable that in some instances the people who score the new writing section are able to detect the race of the writer by the vocabulary and subject matter of the student's essay. There is then a suspicion in some quarters that the scorers of the test may be inclined to "give a break" to black students. Therefore, it is suggested that the examination is graded on a slight curve that benefits blacks and Hispanics.

In *Grutter*, the 2003 Supreme Court case upholding affirmative action in college admissions, Justice Sandra Day O'Connor's decision expressed a goal of eliminating affirmative action over the ensuing 25 years. At the moment there is no evidence that substantial progress toward closing the racial scoring gap on the SAT test will occur. In fact, since the *Grutter* decision the SAT scoring gap has actually widened. Thus, the huge and growing gap in SAT scores, and particularly the scores at the highest levels, becomes one of the nation's most urgent problems. JBHE

The Racial Gap on the SAT Writing Test (2009)



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